DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 232 760 PS 013 606

TITLE Assessing Preschoolers' Development.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Urbana, Ill.
PUB DATE [Mar 83]
NOTE 3p.; This document is an excerpt from a paper by Dr. Lilian G. Katz, entitled "Assessing the Development of Preschoolers"; see ED 226 857.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Development; *Child Development; Evaluation Criteria; Guidelines; *Informal Assessment; Observation; *Preschool Children
IDENTIFIERS PF Project

ABSTRACT

There are 11 behavioral dimensions which parents and preschool teachers can use in assessing the development of preschool children. These dimensions are: (1) sleeping; (2) eating; (3) toilet habits; (4) range of affect or emotion; (5) variations in play; (6) curiosity; (7) acceptance of authority; (8) initiative; (9) interest; (10) spontaneous affection; and (11) enjoyment of the "good things of life." By observing children over a period of time, adults can use information related to these dimensions to determine whether or not a child is developing normally. (DC)

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Assessing Preschoolers' Development

Editor's Note: The excerpt below is drawn from a paper written by Dr. Lilian G. Katz, Director of ERIC/EECE, in conjunction with staff members of the Department of Child Development, Faculty of Home Science, M.S., University of Baroda, Gujarat, India. Fulbright Visiting Professor at the time of writing, Dr. Katz found that, despite many differences between India and the United States in approaches to teaching and caring for young children, interest in the question of whether children are developing normally crosses cultural boundaries.

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Parents responsible for providing their children with what they need to grow and develop often express a need to know what constitutes "normal" development or behavior at any given stage in a child's life. Preschool teachers also look for guidelines by which to assess their pupils' progress.

One way to consider this problem is to consider development in terms of continuous processes. The 11 dimensions suggested below may be helpful in looking at a child's ongoing development. One word of caution, however: judgments about a child's progress should not be based on one or two days of observation but rather on a longer period. A good general rule is that one week of observation for each year of the child's life will be sufficient for making an initial assessment. For example, if the child is three years old, observations should be conducted over a period of three weeks; four years old, for four weeks; and so forth.

Sleeping

Does the child fall asleep and wake up rested, ready to get on with life? While occasional restlessness, nightmares, or grouchy mornings are normal, an average pattern of deep sleep resulting in morning eagerness is a good sign that the child finds life satisfying.

Eating

Does the child eat with appetite? Skipping meals or refusing food on occasion is normal; sometimes the child is too busy with other activities to welcome mealtime or perhaps is more thirsty than hungry at a given moment. However, a child who over a period of weeks eats compulsively or who constantly fusses about the menu is likely to have "got off on the wrong foot." The purpose of eating should be to fuel the system adequately in order to be able to get on with life; food should not dominate adult/child interaction.

Toilet Habits

On the average, over a number of weeks, does the child have bowel and bladder control? The random "accident" is no cause for alarm, especially if there are obvious mitigating circumstances, such as excessive intake of liquids, intestinal upset, or simply absorption in ongoing activities to the point of disregarding such "irrelevancies." Persistent lack of control, on the other hand, may suggest the need for adult intervention.

Range of Affect

Does the child exhibit a range of emotions: joy, anger, sorrow, excitement, and so forth? A child whose emotions are of low intensity or whose affect is "flat" or unfluctuating—always angry, always sour, always cheerful and enthusiastic—may be having difficulties. Within a range of emotions, the capacity for sadness, to use one example, indicates the ability to make use of correlate emotions: attachment and caring. Both are important signs of healthy development; the inability to experience them may signal the beginning of depression.

Variations in Play

Does the child's play vary over a period of weeks, with the addition of some new elements, even though he or she may play with many of the same toys or materials? Increasing elaboration of the same play activities or engagement in a wide variety of activities indicates sufficient inner security to manipulate (literally, to "play with") the environment. If a child stereotypically engages in the same sequence of play, using the same elements in the same ways, he or she may be emotionally "stuck in neutral," and may be in need of temporary help.

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Curiosity

Does the child occasionally exhibit curiosity and even mischief? A child who never pokes at the environment or never snoops into new territory—perhaps in fear of punishment or as a result of the over-development of conscience—may not be developing optimally. Curiosity signals a healthy search for boundaries.

Acceptance of Authority

Does the child usually accept adult authority? Although the inability to yield to adults may constitute a problem, occasional resistance, assertion of personal desires, or expression of objections indicates healthy socialization. Always accepting adult demands and restrictions without a word may suggest excessive anxiety, fear, or perhaps a weakening of self-confidence.

Initiative

Can the child initiate, maintain, and enjoy a relationship with one or more other children? Playing alone some of the time is fine as long as the child is not doing so because of insufficient competence in relating to others. However, chronic reticence in making friends may create difficulties in the development of social competence or relationship building later on, and is cause for concern.

Interest

Is the child capable of sustained involvement and interest in something outside of himself or herself? Does the child's capacity for interest seem to be increasing to allow longer periods of involvement in activity, games, or play? The emphasis here is on "activities" rather than "passivities," such as television watching. A tendency toward increasing involvement in activities requiring a passive role or the persistent inability to see a project to completion may signal difficulties requiring adult intervention.

Spontaneous Affection

Does the child express spontaneous affection for one or more of those with whom he or she spends time? While demonstrations of affection vary among families and cultures, a child whose development is going well is likely on occasion to let others know that they are loved and to express the feeling that the world is a gratifying place. Excessive expressions of this kind, however, may signal doubts about the strength of attachment between adult and child, and may call for consideration.

Enjoyment of the "Good Things of Life"

Is the child capable of enjoying the potentially "good things of life," such as playing with others, going on picnics, exploring new places, and so forth? A child may have a specific problem—fear of insects or food dislikes, for example—but if the problem does not prevent the child from participating in and enjoying life, then it is reasonable to assume it will be outgrown.

The first three dimensions of development—sleeping, eating, and toilet habits—are particularly sensitive indicators of the child's development, since these the child alone controls. The remaining dimensions, more culture-bound and situationally determined, are still of great value in evaluation, since they are likely to represent important goals held for the child by both parents and teachers.

While the dimensions outlined above provide a useful place to begin in evaluating preschoolers' development, it is important to note that difficulties in any one of these categories, or even in several, are not automatic cause for alarm. Such problems should not be interpreted as signaling an irreversible trend; indeed, temporary difficulties often help those close to the child to understand when the child's situation does not match his or her emerging needs, thus assisting in the process of helping the child "get back on the right foot."